

How will you handle momma's homegoing?

Written by William Reed

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African Americans born in the 1930s and 40s knew another America. Their children have advanced their station and now have different views. But, at the end of the day the question is: "How will you send Momma home?"

Back in the day, times from segregation shaped Black's funeral services in the music, tone and tenor of tributes. The typical Black funeral was: a public viewing, solos like "Last Mile of the Way," a thunderous sermon by a preacher and an ad-hoc choir that rocked the house. After roaring tributes; the preacher, then the family, congregation and choir would follow the funeral director and pall-bearers to the hearse. The congregation caravanned to the cemetery and all then gathered back at the church, or hall, to feast on fried chicken and sweet potato pie.

Be on the alert, the rites of African American "Homegoings;" from the fried chicken to the repast, are changing. Old customs and institutions that were associated with the last rites of African Americans are fading. There is little question that as today's generation of Blacks bury their 1940s and 50s era parents mainstream values and institutions impact this final decision.

Before integration only African American funeral home operators buried African Americans. Almost all Black Family Homegoings involved the services of a black funeral director, an ex-cop with a motorcycle that directed traffic, a caterer usually associated with a Black-owned rental hall, and leaving the body to rest in a traditionally Black-populated cemetery.

What you do at the time of last rites directly relates to recent trends: the decline of Black-owned businesses in 'traditional' personal services to a predominantly Black clientele. The funeral home industry is big business. In the U.S. it is a \$7 billion-a-year industry. Tens of millions of dollars are at stake for each operator. The average cost of a funeral today is \$6,500. As they and families of the nation's 4 million elderly Blacks prepare for the inevitable, the nation's 4,000 mostly family-owned Black funeral homes are themselves in a bad state.

Where Momma will lie in state has great economic impact. African American funeral homes grew out of the times of segregation to become mainstays of Black community and culture. Black funeral directors became pillars of their communities. Most provided their communities folding chairs for parties, limousines for weddings; and, their hearses served as standby ambulances at African American sporting events. To avoid attacks during the civil-rights movement, leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., often were chauffeured from rallies in hearses by Black undertakers. They are the last of Black-owned institutions catering to and supported almost exclusively by African American consumers.

White-owned funeral homes actively market in Black communities. Large white-owned firms are buying up area funeral businesses and offering both funeral and burial services to the African American community. International funeral firms such as Service Corp., Alderwoods Group, Stewart Enterprises, Hillenbrand Industries and Carriage Services are as likely to get the body of a deceased Black as the local African American mortician.

As African Americans become more mainstream oriented, institutions and businesses, such as those of Black funeral directors, are suffering declining market share. Many Blacks have joined integrated church congregations and now follow their practices for death and burials.

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Integration and today's Blacks' decline in racial identification has also all but eliminated the Black funeral home, lost revenues for Black newspapers for announcement of the passing, and the use of the services of the Black-owned food hall and that of the discourteous traffic cop.

In the U.S., the nearly 22,000 funeral operators average two funerals per week. The week your loved one passes will you be sending them home via a Black or White-owned hearse? The question is more than about "how to handle this particular passing?" it goes to a basic capitalistic issue of supporting your own. In this case, and other purchases you make: Isn't it economic suicide for blacks to take their consumer dollars outside our communities? In death, as in life in America, integration is undoing us as other ethnic groups build their communities' wealth with our dollars.

(William Reed – www.BlackPressInternational.com)